DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 163 786 FL 009 887

AUTHOR Williams, Patricia Ann
TITLE What Did You Say? A Study Concerning the Vocabulary, Grammatical, and Pronunciation Choices of Houston Residents.
PUB DATE 75
NOTE 24p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Age Differences; *Dialect Studies; Educational Background; Grammar; Language Research; *Language Usage; *Participant Characteristics; Pronunciation; Questionnaires; Regional Dialects; Sex Differences; *Sociolinguistics; *Speech Communication; *Standard Spoken Usage; Vocabulary
IDENTIFIERS Texas (Houston)

ABSTRACT

Fifty residents of Houston, Texas, were surveyed to determine whether or not factors concerning their background affected their word choice, grammatical usage, and pronunciation. Each informant answered a questionnaire consisting of one page of background data and two pages of questions about his daily speech. In correlating the participants' answers and their backgrounds, five points were analyzed: sex, age, race, education, and residency. Information was obtained on noun choice, grammatical usage, pronunciation, and verb choice. Two important questions were considered: which words and pronunciations are used most frequently, regardless of background, and whether certain factors in a person's background affect his vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation. Specific words and usages are discussed, and a sample questionnaire and chart of responses are included. (SW)

**********
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
**********

ED163786

# WHAT DID YOU SAY?: A STUDY CONCERNING THE VOCABULARY, GRAMMATICAL, AND PRONUNCIATION CHOICES OF HOUSTON RESIDENTS

by

Patricia Ann Williams

FL009887

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Patricia Ann Williams

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

# WHAT DID YOU SAY?: A STUDY CONCERNING THE VOCABULARY, GRAMMATICAL, AND PRONUNCIATION CHOICES OF HOUSTON RESIDENTS

Houston--largest city in the Southwest, boasts of a population exceeding 1,232,000 people in its 506 square mile radius.[1] I surveyed a heterogeneous group of fifty of these Houston residents to determine whether or not various factors concerning their background affected their word choice, grammatical usage, and pronunciation. Each informant answered a questionnaire consisting of one page of background data and two pages of questions about his daily speech (see Appendix A). After completing the interviews, I chose five points to focus on in correlating the participants' answers and their backgrounds. One noted dialectologist, Roger Shuy, influenced my decision because he stated that "words are interesting to everyone. Through his vocabulary a person may reveal facts about his age, his sex, his education, his occupation, and his geographical and cultural origins."[2] Then, he added that "a person's choice of words is not nearly as revealing of education as his grammar and pronunciation are."[3] Considering these statements I tabu-

[1]Houston Chamber of Commerce, Houston Fact Sheet (Houston: Houston Chamber of Commerce, 1975), n.p.

[2]Roger W. Shuy, Discovering American Dialects (Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1967), p. 14.

[3]Shuy, p. 15.

lated the informants' responses in the following manner:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Sex | 29 | Men |
| | 21 | Women |
| 2. Age | 22 | 10-25 years |
| | 18 | 26-45 years |
| | 10 | 46-64 years |
| 3. Race | 41 | Caucasians |
| | 5 | Blacks |
| | 3 | Mexican-Americans |
| | 1 | American Indian |
| 4. Education | 9 | High school not completed |
| | 11 | High school graduates |
| | 14 | College training |
| | 15 | College graduates |
| | 1 | Unanswered |
| 5. Residency | 5 | 1 month - 3 years |
| | 10 | 4-9 years |
| | 33 | 10 years - life |
| | 2 | Unanswered |

The latter two pages of the questionnaire were divided into four sections: noun choice, grammatical usage, pronunciation, and verb choice. Then, a space was provided for any additional comments. One rather irritated Mexican-American male commented,

> It's rather difficult to divulge true information in face-to-face contact with an individual. I feel that questionnaires of this sort should be handed out in large groups. I can't help feeling that those so-called questionnaires are [sic] given in 'full' random. I feel that the object of your testing has something to do with the verbal ability of Mexicanos (Americans) and if that's the case, this paper is loaded too much one way. With little effort I could make up a questionnaire loaded the other way. Enjoy your evaluation!

Possibly his commentary reflected the attitude that I, as a fieldworker, was prying into something very personal, his speech. Instead of personally contacting each individual,

I had my family and friends help me. For example, my mother distributed six questionnaires among her co-workers. My purpose for using this procedure was twofold: less time needed to be allocated for interviewing the informants; and more authentic responses were probably solicited since the informants knew their interviewer. Another fieldworker, Atwood, substantiated my viewpoint when he discussed his method for gathering data. "This [face to face contact] was certainly more conducive to cooperation on the part of the informants than a written or printed questionnaire to be filled out and mailed to an unknown person or agency."[4]

Throughout this project, I focused my attention on two important questions. According to the survey, which words and pronunciations are used most frequently, regardless of background? Do certain factors in a person's background affect his vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation? To answer the first question, I compiled a list of the responses (see Appendix B). If the individual gave more than one response, I included only his first answer. This list revealed certain interesting trends. An overwhelming majority replied to sixteen of the twenty-three questions in a similar manner. For example, forty-three people answered question seven with the word, faucet. Though only question eight seemed to produce a large diversity of answers, no one

[4]E. Bagby Atwood, The Regional Vocabulary of Texas (Austin: Texas Univ. Press, 1962), p. 33.

question elicited identical responses from the fifty participants. I concluded that conformity does exist to the extent that a fieldworker could accurately narrow the possibilities. Next, I studied the individual questions. Instead of working with all five points (Sex, Age, Race, Education, Residency) for each question, I chose to base the selection of variables on the particular question being studied. For instance, numbers one and two were both correlated by two points, age and sex, rather than all five. Two graphs have been included in the Appendix as an aid in visualizing the results. Also, I have noted the total number of informants who gave the same answer. This number has been written in parenthesis after the response, unless it was previously indicated.

In two research studies conducted in Texas, the interviewers asked for the name of the cloth used in drying and polishing dishes. According to one of the surveys, cup towel (45) and dish towel (39) were the most prevalent terms, with drying rag (7) being one of the least. Concerning the second study, Arthur Norman stated that

> If we consider how inappropriate the rag element in dishrag must seem to urban, well-educated Southern ladies (and gentlemen), dishcloth appears to be a well-considered substitute and one destined to replace dishrag eventually.[6]

[5]Atwood, p. 46.

[6]Arthur Norman, "A Southeast Texas Dialect Study," A Various Language: Perspectives on American Dialects, ed. Juanita V. Williamson and Virginia M. Burke (New York: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston, 1971), p. 143.

Perhaps these fieldworkers should have given an additional question, "What is the name of the cloth used to wash dishes?" I discovered that a dish towel (29) was preferred for drying dishes, but a dishrag (27) was preferred for washing them. Maybe the "rag element" has not disappeared, but has only changed its meaning. Neither sex, nor age, seemed to be influential factors in the informants' choices. For question three, Atwood's assertion that "skillet (80) is competing very successfully with frying pan (41)"[7] proved to be valid. Though no distinctions were found between skillet (25) and frying pan (16), 80 percent of those choosing pan (5) were both male and under twenty-five years of age. Of the three Mexican-Americans interviewed, only one had an answer for "the name of a screened room at the front of the house." He identified the room as a breezeway (1). Except for these three, every informant used the word, porch (47), in their answer. Porch has become a modern term.[8]

Sex and education were insignificant variables in naming "the object in the bathroom that you flush." Yet, age differences probably affected the participants' selection of either toilet (29) or commode (14). The youngest group used the term, toilet, 58 percent of the time; while the oldest group used the word only 7 percent of the time. Likewise, 50 percent of the oldest group wrote commode;

[7]Atwood, p. 46.

[8]Atwood, p. 43.

whereas only 14 percent of the youngest group did (see Appendix C). Only one unusual lexical item, bench (1), the choice of a Black female, was used for number six. Otherwise, the two common terms, couch (30) and sofa (17), seemed to prevail. An overwhelming majority chose faucet (43) for question seven, possibly because it takes less time to say than water faucet (3). Whereas fifty-nine people used hydrant according to Attwood's survey, published in 1962;[9] I found only one. A comparison of these two studies indicates that the word, hydrant, is becoming obsolete in Houston. For the question, "what is the name ordinarily used in referring to a person who has a Spanish surname and lives in Texas," two variables, race and age, were important. Though 22 percent of the oldest group said Mexican (18), not one person in that group said Chicano (7). Also, of the five participants who left the question blank, two were in the oldest age group and two others were Mexican-Americans.

Atwood posed the theory that

> The most intangible reason for vocabulary change is fashion. An example may be found in various familiar terms for one's father: pappy, pa, papa, daddy, and so on. I am unable to explain such changes on a rationale basis; but there is no doubt that, quite apart from slang usages, many vocabulary items simply go out of fashion, even among the 'kinship terms,' which are usually regarded as the most stable.[10]

If this theory is creditable, the words, daddy (18) and dad (14) would be considered fashionable in Houston. Almost 78 percent of those who wrote daddy were female. Contrast-

[9]Atwood, p. 46.

[10]Atwood, p. 107.

ingly, males composed 86 percent and 83 percent of those selecting dad or father (12) respectively. Perhaps some of the men felt that the word, daddy, would have made them appear effeminate. Only one person with any college training referred to a member of a university faculty as a teacher (9). Instead, they chose such terms as professor (23) and the slang form, prof (10). College graduates and those under twenty-five years of age frequently chose cop (17) for number eleven. However, the majority of the participants preferred the word, policeman (22). One twenty-one year old, female, college student selected policeperson (1). The women's liberation movement probably guided her choice. Question twelve, "another way of referring to a woman," was usually answered with the term, lady (35). I could not find any apparent distinctions between those who said lady and those who used a colloquial term, such as broad (1) or babe (1).

For the five questions dealing with grammatical usage, I selected education as the variable. My purpose was to investigate Atwood's theory that "items of nonstandard 'grammar' are usually considerably more frequent (or at least easier to elicit) in the less-educated group."[11] Also, I wanted to know if people actually "tend to be much more self-conscious about their use of verb forms . . . than they are about their vocabulary or pronunciation."[12] After re-

[11] Atwood, p. 118.

[12] Shuy, p. 32.

viewing my data, I would have to conclude that the participants were not "self-conscious" about their usage since eighty-five of the 250 answers given would be considered nonstandard English. These deviations from standard English were almost evenly divided among the four levels of education (see Appendix D). Beginning with the lowest level of education, the following number of deviations was recorded: twenty, twenty-two, twenty-four, and seventeen. Another research project, headed by Arthur Norman, agreed with my results concerning the responses to "He has (drink) _____ the glass of water." That project revealed that

> Usage is divided between drunk (7) . . . and drank (6) for the past participle. . . . This usage may be compared with Atwood's findings for the East, which show that the standard drink-drank-drunk forms are not usual, being rejected by half of the 'cultured' New England informants and two-thirds of the well educated informants in the Middle Atlantic States.[13]

Seven of the fifteen college graduates, and five of the fourteen college trainees I interviewed, chose another form of the verb drink, instead of the past participle. Similarly, nine of the high school graduates chose another form besides drunk (22).

In completing the sentence, "Neither Mary nor Jane (be) _____ ready to go," six college graduates and ten college trainees selected the verb, are (29). The responses to this question showed the largest percentage of deviation from standard English (58%) of the five grammatical questions

[13]Norman, p. 327.

asked. Whereas eight participants who were in the two highest educational brackets wrote sang (13) in the sentence, "The choir has (sing) _____ the last song"; only five participants in the two lowest educational brackets used sang. Though everyone who had attended college answered number sixteen, "He has (eat) _____ his dinner," with the "correct" verb, eaten (46), one-half of those who used came (10) for question seventeen, "Has he (come) _____ back from the store," were college educated.

I correlated the pronunciation items with the residency variable. While 80 percent of those who rhymed bayou with try you (18) had been Houston residents for less than three years, 73 percent of those who rhymed bayou with Ohio (30) had been Houston residents for ten years or longer. For question nineteen, an overwhelming majority felt that they pronounced the [h] in Houston (41). However, 78 percent of those living in Houston over ten years denied pronouncing the [h] in Humble (27) when reading the statement, "He worked for Humble Oil." According to forty-six of the informants, gulf and guff are not pronounced alike. But, 85 percent of the ten year to lifetime residents replied that bend and wind rhymed (38). Though I considered this part of the questionnaire the most interesting one, I feel that many of the participants do not really know how they pronounce several of these words. For example, they might try to pronounce the word, Houston, as it is spelled in answering this sur-

vey. Yet, in their daily conversations they might often drop the [h] sound.

For the final question, most of the participants chose either blew (26) or fell (10) to complete the sentence, "The vase _____ over." No one chose the slang term, tumped; though I know the word is frequently used in Houston.

As most authors of the works I have read on dialectology have stated, I would like to reiterate that these are inconclusive conclusions. However, several definite trends seem to be indicated. Enjoy my evaluation!

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Atwood, E. Bagby. The Regional Vocabulary of Texas. Austin: Texas Univ. Press, 1962.

Houston Chamber of Commerce. Houston Fact Sheet. Houston: Houston Chamber of Commerce, 1975.

Norman, Arthur. "A Southeast Texas Dialect Study." A Various Language: Perspectives on American Dialects. Ed. Juanita V. Williamson and Virginia M. Burke. New York: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston, 1971; pp. 309-28.

Shuy, Roger W. Discovering American Dialects. Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1967.

# APPENDIX

## APPENDIX A

### INFORMATION SHEET

Name (optional) _____

Sex _____ Age _____ Race _____

Birthplace _____

Occupation _____

Highest grade level reached in school _____

Last school attended _____

How long have you lived in Houston? _____

How long have you lived at your present address? _____

What section of town do you live in? _____

Other towns and states you have lived in (Please give approximate number of years for each place)

_____

_____

_____

Parent's birthplace

Father _____

Mother _____

Do you speak a foreign language? _____

If so, which one(s) _____

QUESTIONNAIRE

A. Directions: Please fill in the blank with the word you ordinarily use in describing the following items and people.

1. The cloth used to dry dishes _____
2. The cloth used to wash dishes _____
3. What you cook bacon in _____
4. A screened room at the front of the house _____
5. The object in the bathroom that you flush _____
6. The long piece of upholstered furniture _____
7. Device you turn on over the sink _____
8. A person who has a Spanish surname and lives in Texas _____
9. The name you call your male parent _____
10. A person who teaches at a university _____
11. A person in a blue uniform that arrests lawbreakers _____
12. Another way of referring to a woman _____

B. Directions: Please fill in the blank with the form of the word in parenthesis that you would ordinarily use to complete the following sentences.

13. He has (drink) _____ the glass of water.
14. Neither Mary nor Jane (be) _____ ready to go.
15. The choir has (sing) _____ the last song.
16. He has (eat) _____ his dinner.
17. Has he (come) _____ back from the store?

C. Directions: Read the following sentences. Circle the statement that agrees with the way you say the underlined words. There are no correct answers.

18. He fell in the <u>bayou</u>. Bayou rhymes with OHIO or TRY YOU

19. We visited Houston. Houston begins with the sound HUE or YOU

20. He worked for Pumble Oil. Do you pronounce the h? YES or NO

21. The word gulf rhymes with guff. YES or NO

22. Just around the bend the wind is blowing. The word bend rhymes with the word wind. YES or NO

D. Directions: Please fill in the blank with the word you would use to complete the following sentence.

23. If the wind blew a vase over, what verb would you use to describe it.

"The vase _____ over."

ANY COMMENTS:

THANK YOU FOR PARTICIPATING!

## APPENDIX B

## CHART OF RESPONSES

1. The cloth used to dry dishes

| | |
|---|---|
| Dish Towel | 29 |
| Dishcloth | 6 |
| Towel | 6 |
| Cup Towel | 4 |
| Dishrag | 3 |
| Terry | 1 |
| Machine | 1 |

2. The cloth used to wash dishes

| | |
|---|---|
| Dishrag | 27 |
| Rag | 5 |
| Washcloth | 4 |
| Dishcloth | 4 |
| Sponge | 3 |
| Washrag | 2 |
| Washer | 1 |
| Wash Towel | 1 |
| Terry | 1 |
| Dish Towel | 1 |
| Towel | 1 |

3. What you cook bacon in

| | |
|---|---|
| Skillet | 25 |
| Frying Pan | 16 |
| Pan | 5 |
| Grease | 2 |
| Griddle | 1 |
| Oil | 1 |

4. A screened room at the front of the house

| | |
|---|---|
| Porch | 38 |
| Front Porch | 5 |
| Screen Porch | 2 |
| Unanswered | 2 |
| Breezeway | 1 |

| | |
|---|---|
| Enclosed Porch | 1 |
| Screened in Porch | 1 |

5. The object in the bathroom that you flush

| | |
|---|---|
| Toilet | 29 |
| Commode | 14 |
| John | 2 |
| Stool | 2 |
| Pot | 1 |
| Potty | 1 |
| Crapper | 1 |

6. The long piece of upholstered furniture

| | |
|---|---|
| Couch | 30 |
| Sofa | 17 |
| Divan | 2 |
| Bench | 1 |

7. Device you turn on over the sink

| | |
|---|---|
| Faucet | 43 |
| Water Faucet | 3 |
| Light | 2 |
| Hydrant | 1 |
| Unanswered | 1 |

8. A person who has a Spanish surname and lives in Texas

| | |
|---|---|
| Mexican | 18 |
| Chicano | 7 |
| Unanswered | 5 |
| Mexican-American | 3 |
| Garcia | 3 |
| Spanish | 2 |
| Spaniard | 2 |
| Latin American | 2 |
| Maria | 1 |
| Speck | 1 |
| Mescan | 1 |
| Texan | 1 |
| Mix Breed | 1 |
| Spanish Texan | 1 |
| Taco | 1 |
| Amigo | 1 |

9. The name you call your male parent

| | |
|---|---|
| Daddy | 18 |
| Dad | 14 |
| Father | 12 |
| Pop | 2 |
| Robert | 2 |
| Willard | 1 |
| Deceased Dad | 1 |

10. A person who teaches at a university

| | |
|---|---|
| Professor | 23 |
| Prof | 10 |
| Teacher | 9 |
| Instructor | 4 |
| Depends On His Name | 1 |
| Communist | 1 |
| Faculty | 1 |
| Unanswered | 1 |

11. A person in a blue uniform that arrests lawbreakers

| | |
|---|---|
| Policeman | 22 |
| Cop | 17 |
| Police | 7 |
| Officer | 2 |
| Policeperson | 1 |
| Pig | 1 |

12. Another way of referring to a woman

| | |
|---|---|
| Lady | 35 |
| Chick | 5 |
| Female | 3 |
| Gal | 2 |
| Fox | 1 |
| Madame | 1 |
| Babe | 1 |
| Girl | 1 |
| Broad | 1 |

13. He has (drink) _____ the glass of water.

| | |
|---|---|
| Drank | 25 |
| Drunk | 22 |
| Drink | 1 |
| Drinked | 1 |
| Dranked | 1 |

14. Neither Mary nor Jane (be) _____ ready to go.

| | |
|---|---|
| Are | 27 |
| Is | 19 |
| Was | 2 |
| Were | 1 |
| Being | 1 |

15. The choir has (sing) _____ the last song.

| | |
|---|---|
| Sung | 37 |
| Sang | 13 |

16. He has (eat) _____ his dinner.

| | |
|---|---|
| Eaten | 46 |
| Ate | 4 |

17. Has he (come) _____ back from the store?

| | |
|---|---|
| Come | 39 |
| Came | 10 |
| Gotten | 1 |

18. He fell in the bayou. Bayou rhymes with

| | |
|---|---|
| Ohio | 30 |
| Try You | 18 |
| Unanswered | 2 |

19. We visited Houston. Houston begins with the sound

| | |
|---|---|
| Hue | 41 |
| You | 9 |

20. He worked for Humble Oil. Do you pronounce the h?

| | |
|---|---|
| Yes | 27 |
| No | 23 |

21. The word gulf rhymes with guff.

| | |
|---|---|
| No | 46 |
| Yes | 4 |

22. Just around the bend the wind is blowing. The word bend rhymes with the word wind.

| | |
|---|---|
| Yes | 38 |
| No | 12 |

23. If the wind blew a vase over, what verb would you use to describe it? "The vase _____ over."

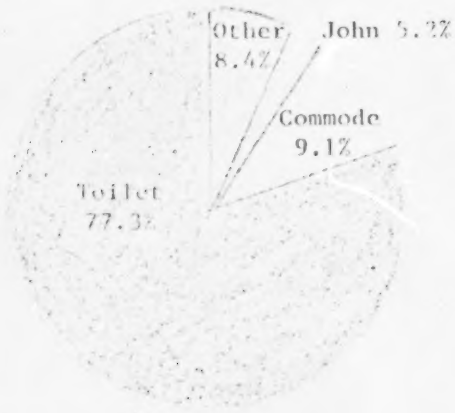
| | |
|---|---|
| Blew | 26 |
| Fell | 10 |
| Was Blown | 9 |
| Has Blown | 3 |
| Blowed | 1 |
| Blow | 1 |

APPENDIX C

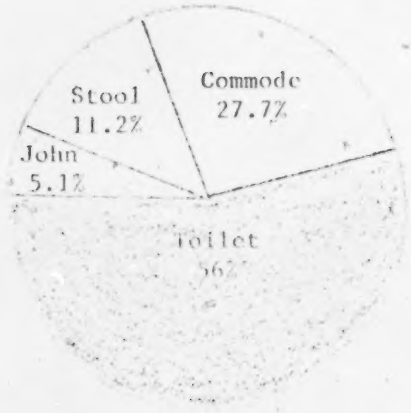
RESPONSES TO QUESTION 5

Age Group

10-25 years



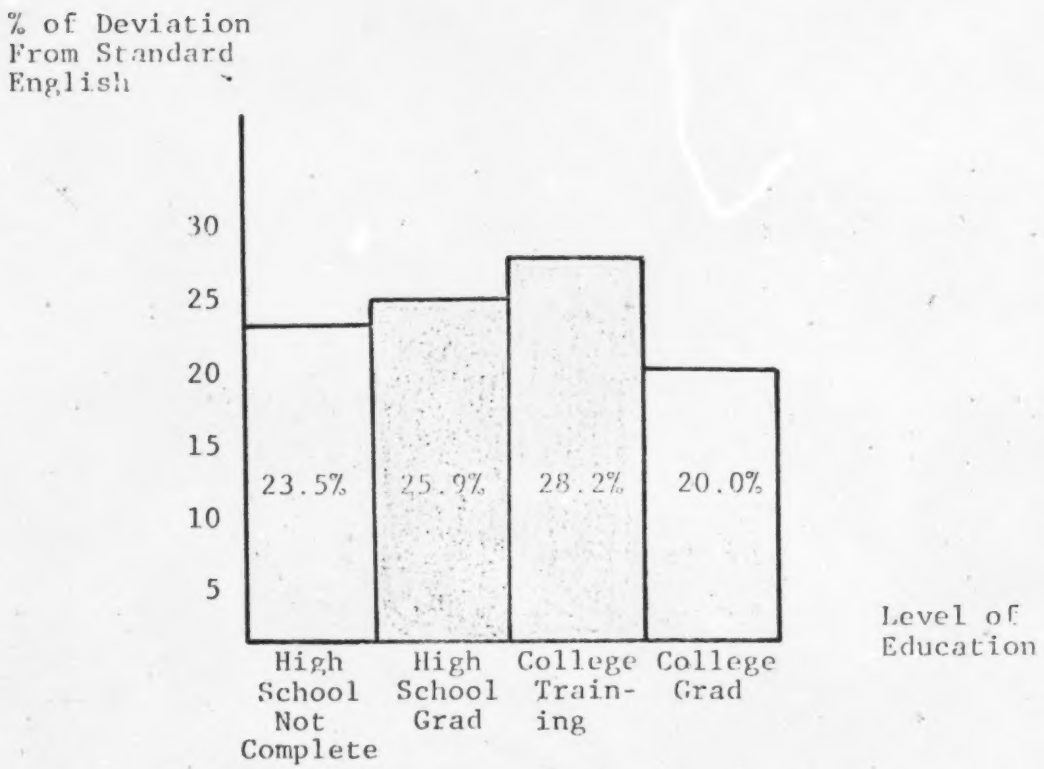

26-45 years




46-64 years

APPENDIX D

RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS 13-17




* 2.4% Level of education unknown.